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NATURE IN ART.

BY F. EDWARD HULME, F.L.S., F.S.A.

A SERIES OF ARTICLES.—No. THREE.

WE have thus far merely deplored the want of definite principles available for the student in design, and set forth the fact that the study of nature must in any case be a step in the right direction, and that such study would not necessarily lead to the mere introduction of national forms, but would still have ample scope for their adaptation to special requirements. Where the care that can be bestowed upon a work of art is fully equal to any amount of labor that can be spent upon it, there would seem to be no objection to putting the best art possible into it; but it would seem to be but labor wasted to expend the best of one's power on a thing of fugitive duration. There is no sharp line that can possibly be drawn between decorative art and fine art, though in many cases one finds no difficulty in assigning to one or the other a given example; hence it is an utter mistake to regard decorative art as on a lower footing than the so-called fine art. Much harm has, of course, been done to the design by many people who call themselves decorators; but this is a disadvantage that almost all callings are liable to, and we do not ordinarily judge any body of men by the worst examples. We should be entirely wrong, for instance, to scoff

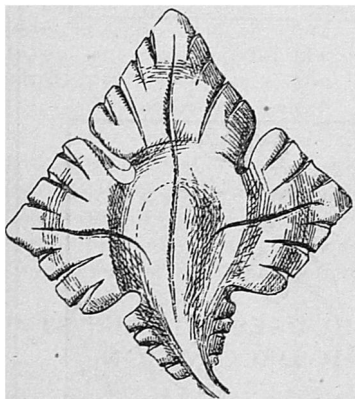


FIGURE ONE.

at the skill of a practiced medical man because we had heard of empirical quacks, or to refuse his aid in an emergency, because some foolish neighbor had ruined his health by trusting to pills that cured every ailment. Decorative art and fine art merge imperceptibly into each other, and the same thing may receive one or the other name according to circumstances. If, for example, we see a group of lilies painted on canvas, put into a gold frame and hung on the wall, we call the result a picture, an example of fine art, the work of an artist; but if the same flowers, equally well painted, are placed in the panel of a door, the result is a decorative design, and the man who painted the group for a picture would look down immensely on the man who painted it for a panel. When we come to figure subjects the distinction is still more difficult. In Rome, Paris, and elsewhere in the large public galleries and palaces we find the work of the first artists adapted to fill certain recognized spaces in the architectural construction, and they are so far decorative, though one would never dare to question their claim to be considered works of fine art as well. Many an old altar-piece and fresco that was essentially decorative art in its original home, becomes a choice example of this, that or the other old master when it is put into a gold frame and hung in some national gallery of paintings.

If we have carried our readers so far with us, we may perhaps now induce them to sanction us in the assertion that the noblest work is that which has most of nature in it, that subordinate service, imperfect means or other drawbacks may sometimes call upon us for a more or less degree of

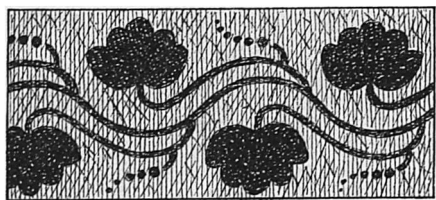


FIGURE TWO.

conventionalism, but that in proportion as we are able to do some justice to the beauty of nature we are fully justified in doing so. At the same time, we owe the beauty of nature the full tribute of our respectful appreciation, and we should never degrade her loveliness by putting it to unworthy use. A certain amount of conventionalism is, for example, called for in a design for a carpet or wall paper—no one would desire to walk on groups of natural roses nor to hang pictures upon them. In the same way chair coverings that we sit on or lean against should suggest the grace of nature

at most, and not endeavor absolutely to reproduce it. Imperfect means at our disposal again call upon us rather to adopt a good conventional treatment than an inferior naturalistic one—a designer, for instance, who is required to produce work that will only be printed in one or two colors should not attempt naturalistic representation, and, in the same way, festoons of natural flowers would be felt to be quite unsuitable for carving in mahogany, a material calling rather for conventional scroll-work. The crisp and crimson petals of the rose lie entirely outside the scope of the worker in mahogany. We may add, then, to our first proposition that the noblest work is that which has most of nature in it, a record that the beauty of nature should not be attempted to be expressed when the circumstances of the case necessarily show that the result must be a failure, for in that case the goodness of the intention does not excuse the imperfection of the result; imperfection of means, whatever form this may take, must be frankly recognized together with the limitation it imposes.

In Greek art this conventionalism arising from imperfect means is frankly accepted; hence, in the one or two flat tints that were available in their vases, either red or buff or black, or the reverse, black or red or buff, we find no attempt to absolutely reproduce nature. The figure subjects in the centres of the pateræ or vases are treated in a bold and flat manner, more bas-reliefs than pictures, and the floral bandings are suggestive, not imitative. As in most cases the means at the service of the designer would prevent an absolute reproduction of nature, and in other cases the facsimile of the natural form would often on other grounds be objectionable, the suggestion rather than the imitation of nature will ordinarily be found the correct treatment to adopt. In the Greek vases the bands of foliage are clearly recognizable often as suggested by the ivy, the laurel, the vine and other well-known plants, and where

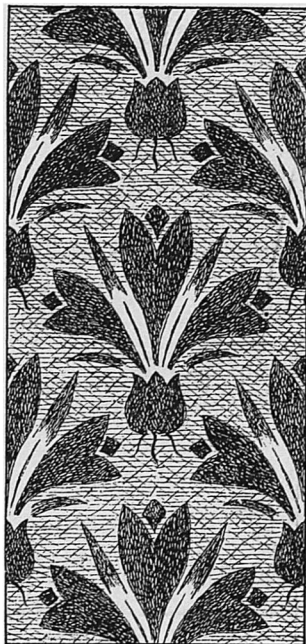


FIGURE THREE.

the forms are of a more arbitrary character the laws of plant growth are still observed, and the effect of the whole satisfying to the eye. Figure Two is a very good example of the latter class. The result appears to us infinitely preferable to any more labored attempt to give a naturalistic representation with imperfect means, as we often see in the floral groups printed in one color on the lower class of pottery goods. For the same reason, much of the art of India has a beauty in its frank simplicity that our more labored productions often fail in reaching, while the variety of design they evolve from the few simple and characteristic forms they employ is a valuable hint to those who too closely adhere to a set treatment. Probably all who are at all conversant with the works of various designers, will bear us out when we say that in many cases a strong tinge of monotony runs through the work of some men. The first design we see of theirs we admire immensely, the second strikes us perhaps as being about equally good, but somewhat like number one, and when we have come across three, four and five we have already a shrewd idea what six, seven and eight will be like. The study of nature on the part of the designer is a great corrective of this; the man who feeds on his own imagination comes quickly to the boundary of his powers and loses all that infinity of variety that an intelligent observation of nature would afford. Both in Greek and Egyptian arts we feel that though the work is good, and, indeed, often excellent, it palls somewhat upon one, just because the ground covered is too circumscribed. The Egyptians fully felt the beauty of natural forms, yet they give us little beyond the lotus, the papyrus or the palm leaf, while the Greeks scarcely anything beyond the plants we have mentioned, and the acanthus leaf. It is, perhaps, not saying too much if we suggest the probability of there being in the futile delta of the Nile and the sunny land of Greece at least fifty other plants almost or quite equally available for the purposes of design. The Greek honeysuckle pattern will probably occur to the minds of our readers, and they may wonder why we have

omitted it; but we have never ourselves been able to make out any resemblance, though we have spent many hours in the presence of Greek art, and many years amidst the fragrant honeysuckle that clustered over our home. It is one of the dogmas of the professors of design that the one form undoubtedly suggested the other; but it appears to us rather a testimony to the inherent beauty of a mass of radiating and upspringing masses, instinct with the suggestion of vitality and growth, rather than a suggestion of any one plant. Its occasional resemblance to the buds of the

honeysuckle is an accidental rather than an incidental result. One feels the same monotony in the geometric design of the Greeks. When we consider the infinity of design possible, the half-dozen frets, or key-patterns, and the three or four types of spirals seem a very small contribution towards the possibilities of the case. It will, no doubt, strike some people that this sort of talk is rank heresy; but it appears to us that all the art of the past is our heritage, and that we do not derive all the benefit from it that we should when we place it beyond criticism. Greek art and Greek literature are the noblest inheritance of the past and altogether priceless; but we reserve, nevertheless, to ourselves the right of private judgment.

Gothic art covers so wide a field that it is impossible to deal with it in one hasty generalization; but we may perhaps be allowed to sum up the decorative aspect of the question in three broad aspects, agreeing chronologically with the three distinct styles or periods. We find, first, a period of advance known technically as the early pointed, or sometimes called according to nationality, as the Early English, Early French, and so forth; secondly, an intermediate period of decline passing from the perpendicular Gothic to the bathos of Tudor and Elizabethan, the fifteenth century work everywhere being inferior to the fourteenth. The floral decoration of the first period is at first stiff and poor, but quickly passes into an altogether delightful freedom. In this the forms are conventional; but all the grand principles of vegetable growth and structure are faithfully observed. The leaves are thrown up with all the vigorous up-springing of nature, and all the points spring naturally from a central line. In the fourteenth century this is exchanged for an excess of naturalism, and the capitals and string-courses become wreathed with all the treasures of the hedgerow, the richly cut leaves of the buttercup, the sprays of the wild rose, the sturdy growth of the acorn-laden oak, the beautiful leaves of the maple, the spring foliage of the thistle, and many others. At first sight one would say that this must be a decided step in advance, but, on reflection, we do not feel it to be so. The grand simplicity and suggestiveness of the earlier work is gone, and all the elaboration and intricate detail of the later carving fail to do justice to the grace of nature. Beautiful as it is in intention, and in appreciation of natural forms, the delicacy and grace of the wild denizens of the hedge bank and the forest cannot be adequately expressed in stone work, nor would it be desirable, on other grounds, that they should be. Hence, we arrive at this uncomfortable state of things, where we blame the old carvers because their work does not express the lightness of nature, while, if it did, we should cen-



FIGURE FOUR.



FIGURE FIVE.

sure them because the sense of solidity and support, so essential in a capital or other architectural feature, would be lost. The parts must not only be strong, constructively, but they must give a strength to the eye. The moral, therefore, clearly is that in any case, in such a position, the direct imitation of the natural forms is a mistake. In the third period, that of the fifteenth century, the foliate forms became very arbitrary, and there is often little or no suggestion of nature in them (see Figure Two), being, in most cases, such as a man could most readily and effectively produce by gouge and chisel, unfettered by any idea of imitation of any natural form. With certain limitations and exceptional examples allowed for, one may say that the fall from the previous excellence was final, complete and hopeless, and that the decoration of the fifteenth century, or perpendicular period, was almost wholly bad. The first style was good; the second showed great appreciation of nature, but failed from having too high an ambition; the third failed from having no appreciation of nature at all, but supplemented the purer feeling by a petty complacency in their skill of hand.

Where, as in wall paper, things repeat mechanically and frequently, the forms should be conventionalized. It is an insult to the infinite variety of nature to repeat at every few inches the same bunch of roses or the same bird in the same position, and engaged in the same act. Hand-work, on the contrary, may justly be varied; and even if we confine ourselves to our roses we are able to produce a sufficient identification in the grouping to prevent the tedious sense of sameness and thus produce unity in variety and variety in unity. Machinery most readily produces identity of result, while the human hand and brain most readily produce variety of result; each, therefore, should be employed in the direction for which it is most fitted. Though we admire the long rows of Corinthian capitals, all exactly alike, in some noble temple, or the stately avenue of sphinxes in part of some grand temple in the Valley of the Nile, one cannot help feeling that the word "individuality" has been crushed in their production, and we turn with a feeling of refreshment to the play of fancy seen in all the varied details of some grand old Gothic pile and breathe a freer air. In our sketch based on the crocus flower (see Fig. one) we have endeavored to steer midway between a cold conventionalism and an inappropriate naturalism. As the forms repeat mechanically, and at short intervals a free and semi-pictorial rendering would be undesirable, and the symmetrical effect of the group and the regular alternation of leaf and flower give that measure of conventionalism which the case seems to require, while the forms are sufficiently true to nature to enable us to recall something of the beauty of the real flower, we have, in the same way, endeavored in our two panels, based on the hawthorn foliage and fruit, to steer the middle course. For the purposes of our design we have assumed that only two colors are available, a dark ground color and a lighter tint upon it—how far we have been successful in giving an idea of the beauty of the hawthorn under these limitations is a matter that we must leave to others to judge; one sketch, at all events, shows our own idea of what such a treatment should be.

Sometimes, in addition to the almost inevitable necessity of repetition, conventionalism is still further forced upon us by some exigency of the manufacture, as in weaving, where everything has to be worked in squares, and the outlines all look like flights of steps, a fatal bar is placed in the way of an adequate representation of the grace and delicacy of nature. This may be very well noticed in carpets and lace curtains. A clever and practiced design for this class of goods will produce an approx-

imation to nature under this limitation that is often surprising; but the struggle is, after all, too unequal, and the result can only be tolerated when the squares are so small that at a little distance the eye fails to perceive them. In such a case a frank recognition of the inadequacy of the means to reproduce the flowing lines and delicate curves of nature, and the consequent recourse to a conventionalized treatment, is far preferable to striving after a result that is, at least, but a caricature.

Why not devise some more honest calculator than a gas meter? A recent case in England shows the meter registered 86,000 feet above the quantity consumed, and several cases in this country have shown us that it is an ordinary error here. We know of nothing grander than to see the householder mortgaging his property to pay his gas bill, but the question will sometimes arise in the house keepers mind, "Does that meter ever make a mistake on the other side?"

ONE of the most practical ideas that has been given the young art student for some time, was that offered by Mr. Sparkes, the Principal of the National Art Training Schools, at their recent exhibition. The Principal said: "I advise all fifth-rate artists to take stock of their weaknesses and find some other way of earning their living. There are some people who think they must be designers because they can paint and draw a little. I knew a man of that kind, who found out his mistake, and is now very rich through selling bottled beer."

THE Renaissance is a style that goes well with luxury, rich carpets, silks, gold and bright colors. It is very well suited, for example, to be used in decorating a lady's boudoir, to be associated with rose color or pale blue hangings.

MODERN HOUSES: THEIR STYLE AND DECORATION.

BY R. B. PRESTON, A.R.I.B.A.

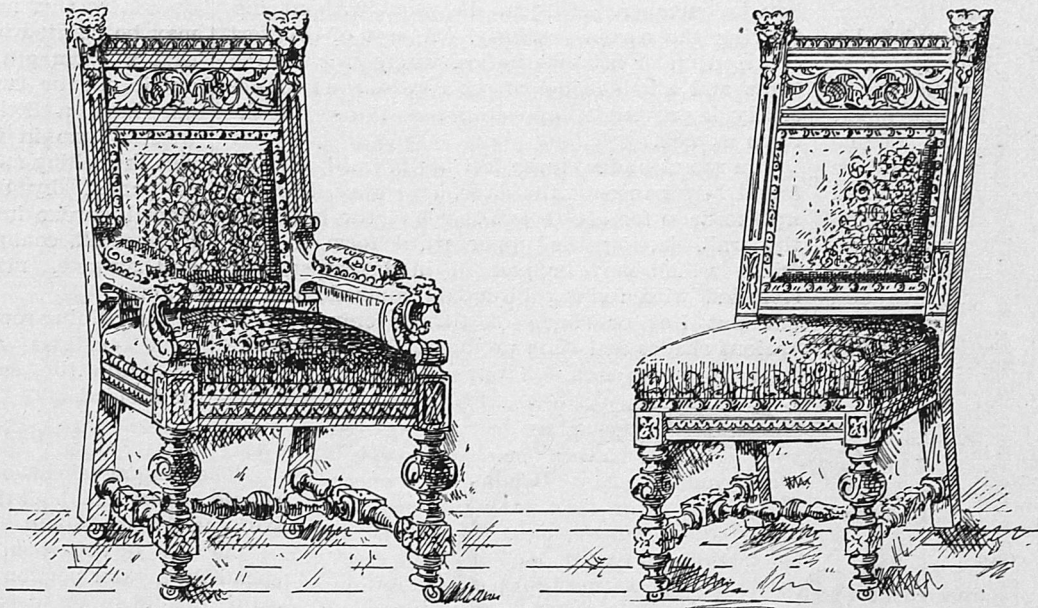
[From *The British Architect*.]

ENTRANCE HALL AND STAIRCASE.

THE floors of the entrance halls of our middle-class houses are, as a rule, either boarded or flagged, and are usually covered with oil-cloth or linoleum, which soon becomes shabby and wears out. The dust and dirt also collect underneath. In the first case, the boards may be taken up and the floor filled in between the joists with concrete and tiling, or marble mosaic laid therein, always forming, if possible, a sunk space for the mat. Broad masses of plain tiles, four inches or six inches square, of either red, gray or buff, are always more satisfactory than elaborate patterns, and have the advantage of being cheaper and also less liable to get loose, for it must be remembered that a tile floor laid upon joists in this way is never so lasting as when laid upon a solid foundation. In the second case the margins of the flags may be painted a good warm color, or a border of incised lines may be cut and filled in with colored cements. Sometimes the flags are laid in squares placed diagonally; in a case of this sort, a good effect may be produced, at no very great expense, by filling in the joints with colored cement, and placing a small red or black tile in the corner of each flag, which, of course, must be cut out to receive it.

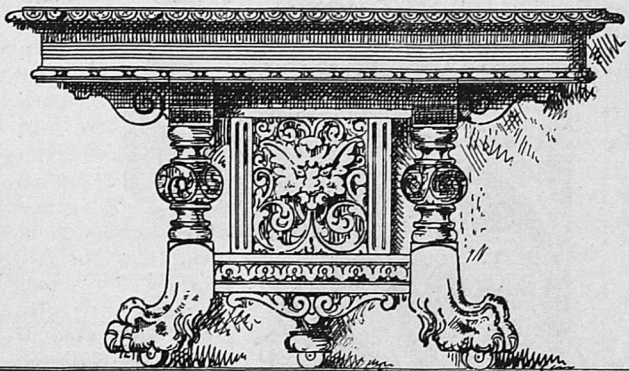
The walls may be painted, for two-thirds of their height a neutral color, not light enough to show finger-marks, and, if it is not intended to have many pictures, a little simple stenciling may be done in a darker shade of color.

Dividing this portion from



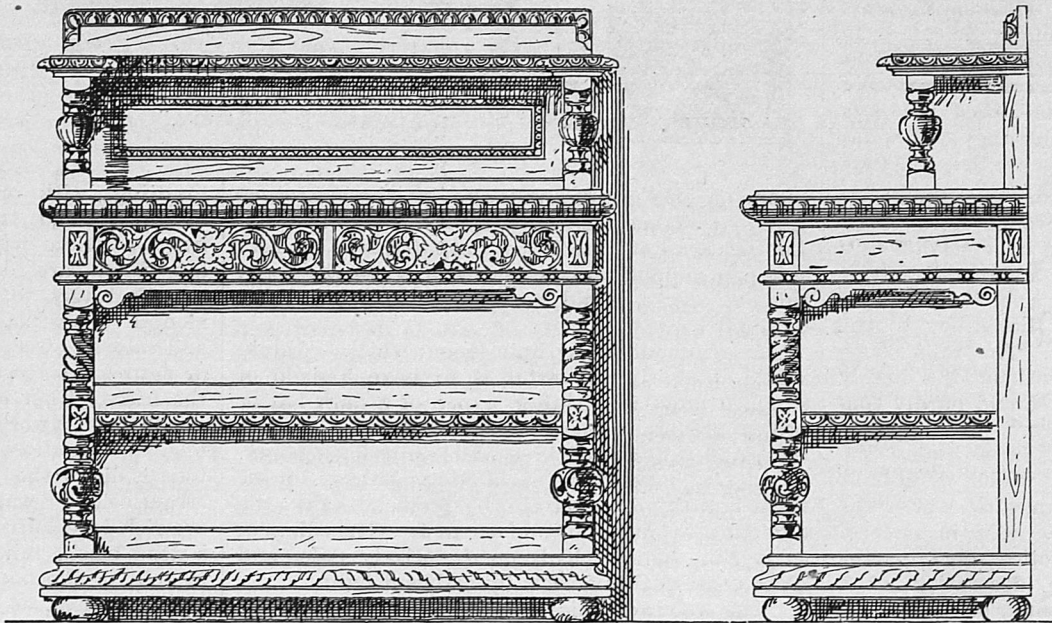
DINING ROOM CHAIRS

Jas. Thomson
1882



DINING ROOM FURNITURE
EXTENSION TABLE

Jas. Thomson
1882



DINING ROOM FURNITURE
SIDE TABLE

Jas. Thomson
1882

ANTIQUE CHAIRS AND TABLES.

THE chairs, extension table and side table, shown upon this page, are part of the scheme for antique furnishing commenced in the December Number, where we gave the sideboard and portion of the wall and window of a dining-room.

The chairs should be upholstered in dark brown embossed leather and studded with large brass nails; the carving of both chairs and tables should correspond with the sideboard in being rather rough in execution, and without much finish after leaving the chisel of the workman.

The taste of the times has a decided tendency toward old styles of various kinds; the Colonial seems to be assuming popularity, and it has many features that make it very attractive; all phases of the Renaissance are in demand, and the French and Spanish Renaissance particularly are favored.